

KnobGallery Success Story



Joan Shelley, Owner and CEO of KnobGallery, developed a niche market for cabinet hardware with her home-based business that provides Internet and retail customers with the largest single source for decorative hardware. She thought of the idea for KnobGallery.com in the mid-'90s as a way to simplify the old-fashioned, painstaking process of choosing hardware from catalogues. Besides expediting the search process, Joan had a goal to create an online design and shopping system that would have the selection and customization of "Tiffany's" mixed with a "hometown" atmosphere. This gives average homeowners an array of resources available only to professionals. Building KnobGallery.com into a premier home hardware venue has only been possible through the help of talented family members, friends, and employees. KnobGallery has two showrooms located at 189000 W. Bluemound Rd. in Brookfield and 241 N. Broadway in Milwaukee.

Joan's concept of allowing customers to directly sort and choose from 120,000 cabinet knobs, and then purchase them online was innovative. Even more unique was the search mechanism and complete program for processing orders and accounting that she designed behind the scenes on the web. She has been able to integrate not only catalog sales on the internet, but invoicing, purchase orders, shipping and receiving functions, and maintains a complete contact management database with task functioning. Through this system, seventy percent of her products are delivered anywhere in the country within seven business days. With this "web-based" backbone in place, Joan has been able to tie people from around the country to work together via web and virtual private networking between the main office in Oconomowoc and the storefronts in Brookfield and Milwaukee, purchasing in North Carolina, customer service in multiple locations, graphic design in Missouri and photography in Utah. She also has system that allows a customer to call in, be transferred and serviced directly by anyone of her associates around the country.

Joan had to create KnobGallery's image as that of a comfortable place to shop, with knowledgeable staff and reasonable prices. Planning and designing the site was done exclusively by Joan and her then sixteen-year-old daughter Kristina who was an emerging graphic and web designer. They studied, graphed, outlined and planned for months to create a website organization to meet their needs. With no funding to hire employees, Joan utilized the time and talents of her husband and family. E-commerce was not looked at with much confidence in 1999, so finding business capital was nearly impossible. Joan self-funded the business for the first year, but due to rapid growth, needed more money. Through Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation, Joan was able to secure an SBA guaranteed loan.

Joan has managed to consistently grow KnobGallery. She has accomplished this growth through careful and diligent use of Internet sales techniques that produced results. As sales grew, Joan constantly monitored Internet sales results and determined how and where to cut the high cost of “click-thru’s” while still maintaining sales. This required her to learn a completely new language on e-commerce. She has also negotiated key sales partnerships with local and national vendors, including builders who feature her products in their model homes and included her hardware options in their contracts.

Joan has grown from a one-woman operation to today’s staff of 17-20 employees. Employment has always been family friendly and has provided a welcoming environment to employees who would have a difficult time in the traditional 9-5 workplace. Joan believes in the value of work and has made many of her personnel decisions guided by her personal dedication to building and maintaining positive families in the community.

Joan has taken on a business partner, CPA Joan Kuerschner. Joan says, “She will be a great asset in financial management and business growth planning.” Joan has also established “WebShare” business partnerships. This program allows KnobGallery to co-market a website where they put all the KnobGallery information on a website that looks like the business partner and tag it with Powered by KnobGallery. This gives the business partner an opportunity to keep the collateral sales within their own business model without any additional personnel, stock, or web development. This will be especially helpful to those in rural areas. It will allow a rural kitchen and bath dealer, Interior designer or Cabinet Shop to offer Knob Gallery’s entire array of specialty hardware to their clients. This keeps people from going elsewhere to choose and purchase hardware allowing them to keep their customers more fully serviced and keep the sales in the local community.

Joan has supported the community in several ways. KnobGallery was contacted by The Playhouse Project in San Diego, CA that was raising money for the support of foster children. This group constructed detailed children’s playhouses and Joan donated doorknobs and cabinet knobs that she had designed for five of these houses. In addition, at the company’s expense, Joan sent her daughter (a graphic artist) to assist for a weekend in the promotion and sale of these houses. KnobGallery has donated several gift certificates to local schools in fundraising auctions.

Joan also assisted a local non-denominational church group to raise money for free transportation for the elderly in the community by creating a decorative display and donating a gift certificate. Joan donates time to teaching and planning activities to her church children’s organization. She is also a local resource for a volunteer women’s organization to help coordinate assistance to the families of acute and terminal patients.

Joan is an entrepreneur in the finest sense. She continually strives to grow her business while maintaining the values and work ethics that makes businesses a success. SBA is proud to have played a part in the success of KnobGallery.